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Protect Yourself and Your Shipmates from Noroviruses

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Airman Apprentice Tyler Terry, left, and Airman Cord Barton, assigned to Air Department's V-1 Division on board aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75), clean a passageway as part of daily cleaning stations. All hands participate in cleaning stations to maintain ship habitability, readiness and morale. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Rob Aylward/Released)

Here at the Navy's hub for health surveillance, we are supporting you by continuously monitoring the health of our shipmates so that we may advocate for and recommend improved force health protection guidance.

One of my tasks toward that end is to monitor the incidence of disease and injury as it is reported from our Navy's afloat units. This team effort between us and Navy Medicine's fleet reporters has provided us a clearer understanding of the major sources/types of illness that might occur while serving aboard our Navy's ships. Now we can say with more certainty that acute gastroenteritis, most likely from a norovirus, is the source of most illnesses that may occur aboard our ships. This is not a surprising finding, because noroviruses are extremely infectious at very low doses and can be easily spread from person to person.

The following are actions you can take to protect yourself, your shipmates, and your family. First, maintain good habits of always washing your hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, eating, or preparing/handling food. Do this vigorously for at least 20 seconds with soap and water. Do this because outbreaks of disease from noroviruses often begin with an

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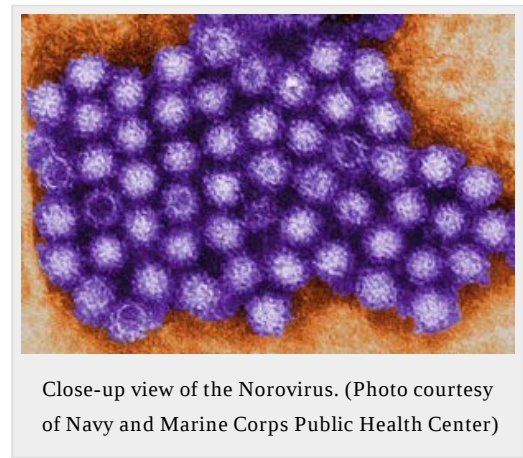
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infected food handler who contaminates ready-to-eat foods or utensils, and once loosed in a population the virus spreads quickly from person-to-person, especially among those in crowded living quarters aboard ships. This happens because the virus is shed in high amounts in feces and vomit, and it is very infectious at very low doses. Therefore, if you have leadership responsibilities, take time to talk to your new shipmates about the special importance of good hygiene and frequent hand washing while serving aboard our ships.



I am asked sometimes about the effectiveness of hand sanitizers. Do they help? For noroviruses we are not sure. It's believed that certain alcohol based hand sanitizers can be helpful in slowing the spread of some diseases, but it's not clear how effective they are against noroviruses, so I advise that you do not substitute them for hand washing with soap and water. If they are all you have, still use them when you would normally wash your hands. They will help reduce the threat from other disease-causing organisms.

Finally, I also want to emphasize that noroviruses are very hardy organisms that cannot be killed on environmental surfaces by the use of typical sanitizing agents or cleaners. For that reason, it is very important that you notify your “Doc” if you or your shipmates experience or become aware of vomiting or fecal accidents aboard your ship. Do not attempt to clean these up yourself, unless instructed by your “Doc” to do so, and limit access to the area. Know that clean-up in these situations requires special procedures and sanitizers to be effective if a norovirus is believed to be the cause of illness.

Well I have touched on the basics, but there is more to know. I encourage you to visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control’s *Preventing Norovirus Infection* website at <http://cdc.gov/features/norovirus> to learn more.

And, if you are a “Doc” in the fleet, I encourage you to see specific guidance that we have developed for you. Use it to support your commander and your shipmates. It is available in our technical guide, *Norovirus Illness Prevention and Control Guidance for the U.S. Fleet*, at <http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/program-and-policy-support/disease-surveillance/Pages/default.aspx> under the section titled “Publications and Products”.

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